

**BRUCE AND CLARK**

**A NOVELLA**

**BY**

**DAVID JAMISON**

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**David Jamison**

**Middletown, Ohio**

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# Introduction

First off, I'd like to state that this work in no way means to infringe upon the intellectual property of the estates of Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, or the many other writers whose inspirations have informed it. What I'm trying to do is tell a story of a friendship between two men in our culture who are trying to accomplish something grand. My inspiration of using these two characters derives from Marco Arnaudo's construction of the serial comic-book world as a "shared cultural heritage" comprising a "narrative in which one story like Superman's or Batman's, which first appeared in the 1930s, has been regularly and consistently followed without interruption . . . with dozens of authors, each inserting himself into the collective work by adding his own touch."<sup>1</sup> Every American alive today grew up with these characters as part of our cultural legacy, and they are both such intriguing poles of the American id. There are few more nationalistic symbols of our collective story short of Uncle Sam.

In a sense the serialized nature of comics, the fact that they are this unique continuous storyline told over generations, necessitates that those who are inspired by the story add to it. So I am writing this story for all Americans. I won't even mention the fact that Arnaudo's quote didn't bother to say "each inserting him *or her* self into the collective work." It goes without saying (even though, yes, I did mention it) that the people who have been historically chosen to represent these characters do not represent the full gender or cultural spectrum of current-day America. So I am writing this work for all America. And it is also *about* America. And that in which we believe.

David Jamison  
Middletown, Ohio

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<sup>1</sup> Marco Arnaudo *The Myth of the Superhero* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 2-4

# Chapter One

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“Bruce, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. And I . . . I don’t want you to take it the wrong way. I need you to know that I—“

“Spit it out, Clark.”

“Maybe this isn’t such a good time.”

Bruce breathed a heavy sigh and proceeded to turn off his spectral-analysis machine. Ever since Clark had arrived, he hadn’t looked up.

“Alright, here you go. You have my full attention. What can I do for you?”

“The team is worried. You haven’t made the last two meetings and you never responded to the emergency alert we sent out Thursday.”

“Was it genuine or was it a drill?”

“That’s not the point—“

“Our agreement was that you would notify me in case of any drills so I wouldn’t have to interrupt my wor—“

“Which we discussed at the meeting before last. Barry, Hal, John, and Diana were resting easy when the call went out because they knew—“

“Clark, let me explain something to you that I think you already know. I appreciate the team. I am dedicated to it. But I am also dedicated to my work here in my town. I will not sacrifice the people of this city while I go around chasing monsters. That’s what *you’re* there for. If my talents are not going to be put to their maximum use—“

“But Bruce—“

“*Excuse me.*” Clark stopped short. “If my talents are not going to be put their maximum use, I’d just as soon be someplace where they will be.”

Clark took another deep sigh. He started a word, stopped, then started again. Then he took a few steps forward, his feet barely touching the floor.

“Look, I think I know what this is about.”

“You do, hunh?”

“Listen, I spoke to Diana. She didn’t mean anything by the . . . I know what she said might have seemed hurtful—“

“You don’t know shit, Clark, and you need to stop acting like you do. There are a lot of things going on that you’re not privy to.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“With my X-ray vision and my super-hearing, I’m not privy?”

“Does your super-hearing make you smarter, Clark? Does it make you a better detective?”

Clark’s pained expression betrayed his attempt to be as stoic as Bruce.

“There’s no need to say things like that, Bruce. I know you’re smarter than I am. I also know that whenever someone hits a nerve the first thing you do is try hurt the people around you.”

Silence.

“I guess I’m the fool because I keep taking it.”

Clark starts to leave.

“Clark. Come back. Look, you . . . you know sometimes I forget . . . that we come from two different worlds. I don’t remember that I can’t talk to you like you’re from Gotham City. Someone from Gotham makes some asshole comment like I did, his buddies just give it back to him twice as bad.”

“I’m not from Gotham, Clark.”

“No. I know. You’re from Kansas. Do you know you are the first person I’ve ever met from Kansas?”

“I hope I made a good impression.”

“Clark, listen. You know I don’t like talking about things like this, but you . . . *you* know. You’re my . . . best friend. I think you might be my only friend.”

“Bruce, you’ve got lots of—“

“No. I don’t. Please don’t bother acting as if you don’t know. Everyone on the team is afraid of me, except for maybe Jordan and Queen. Even the people I’ve known the longest . . . sometimes I think even Dinah . . . The point is, I know everyone in the world wouldn’t put up with me. And I know I make you defend me to the others a lot. More than you should need to. I want you to know that I appreciate that.”

“I defend you because I believe in you, Bruce. You’ve pulled me out of the fire more times than everyone else on the team combined, except maybe Diana. The others realize that too.”

“Yeah, I get a lot of political capital because of that.”

“And not just me. Hardly a day goes by in the lunch room without me hearing some story or another about you saving the day.”

“Do you listen to all the conversations in the lunch room at the same time?”

“Naah, just . . . I’ve learned how to filter most of it out. But I always pay special attention whenever I hear your name.”

“Listen, I need to get this analysis done before my patrol tonight.”

“Okay, so here’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Why don’t you act as team coordinator for a while?”

“Something wrong with John?”

“No, I just . . . I want to get you back involved, like really involved. We need your . . . I don’t know . . . your eye for details. We need your edge.”

“How do the others feel about the idea?”

“Hal and Ollie’ll come around. They just like to talk a good game. In some ways I think they’re jealous of us.”

“Why?”

“Well, you know all those years they spent on the streets. Sometimes I think they wish they got the same type of recognition we do. I know Ollie is a little resentful of that.”

“They can have it. You know what Queen said to me back when we helped put out that oil tanker fire together? He said he figured I’d be disappointed we put it out before the news copters got there. Can you believe that shit? I mean what would that say about me just as a person, let alone a guy who’s actually trying to make a difference out there?”

“That’s why he says those things, Bruce. To get a rise out of you.”

“Yeah but, what’s the point? I mean, I made the effort, you know? I chose him to go with me on our first team-up mission because I knew I had to get to a point where he could trust me and I could trust him. And then . . . and then . . . I don’t know, it . . . it really got to me.”

“I know. He knows what buttons to push. Why don’t you let me talk to him?”

“Clark—“

“Just as a mediator. I’m not a counselor, and I’m not interested in being one. But I know both of you fairly well and I think once you two break through that . . . thing you have between you, you’re gonna look up and realize that you’ve actually got quite a bit in common.”

“I thought that too, for a while. I actually quite admired his work in Star City—until I had to work with him. He just automatically started off with a chip on his shoulder, challenging all my tactical decisions.”

“Well, I think I know what that was about.”

“Please enlighten me.”

“Ollie had some issues adjusting when he first joined the team. I think he felt a little inferior. And I don’t think he wanted to pal around with the only other ‘normal’ person. He had a lot to prove, you know?”

“Hm. Makes sense.”

“Not too stupid after all, hunh?”

“So am I going live that down or are you going to bring it up now for the next two years, like the Contingency Plan?”

“No, I’ll let it go. My Ma taught me better than to kick a man when he’s down.”

“Thank God for Martha Kent.”

“Amen to that. So I’ll see you at the next meeting?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“See that you are.”

Starts to leave.

“And Bruce?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re my best friend, too.”

Bruce turned back to his work, and Clark exited as quickly as he entered. Bruce gave a short chuckle before exhaling, “What a cornball,” only to hear a booming voice from what seemed like miles away.

*“I can hear you! . . .”*

“I know!”



## Chapter Two

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“I talked to Oliver. He asked me if you had told me that you called him a ‘third-rate Robin Hood with loner issues.’”

“The man always has to have an audience. Do you know I once saw him carrying his lunch down the hall looking for people to talk to because the lunch room was empty? What kind of guy—“

“Bruce, you know what happened to him on that island.”

“I know, but . . . “

“But what?”

“Was there anything else?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t finished. So the next step is for you to talk, and in that talk I really think you should apologize.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Do you think what you said was insensitive?”

“Probably.”

“And are you interested in fixing this or not?”

“Clark, I don’t have time to hold the hand of some spoiled millionaire playboy who collects blondes like they were action figures.”

“That’s interesting.”

“I know what you’re thinking. I could have said any hair color. The blonde thing was just—“

“He did also mention that he thought something went on between you and Dinah.”

“Dinah’s not even a real blonde.”

“I know.”

“But Queen didn’t. Do you know he met Dinah three times when she was a brunette but never looked at her twice? But as soon as she put on the wig and fishnets . . . “

“Bruce, we have to get through this thing. We have serious business to take care of and I don’t think—“

“Did you . . . do you think I’m not taking this seriously?”

“Maybe that wasn’t the right choice of—“

“Maybe it wasn’t.”

Clark exhaled a deep sigh that froze the air around him. “We don’t have to like the people that we work with. Oliver is the strongest team leader we have. Billy, Zatanna, Ronnie, none of them would be half the assets they are now without his training. However he does it, he motivates people, Bruce. In a way that I’ve never seen anyone motivate people.”

“He speaks from the heart, I’ll give you that. Alright, I’ll take back the Robin Hood crack.”

“It was pretty disrespectful. He’s a legend in Star City, you know that.”

“When are we going to investigate that arms-smuggling ring I asked you about last week?”

“I sent Ray in the next day. He said there’s no activity on the wireless.”

“They don’t communicate on the wireless. You said you were going to get me inside Biogenesis Inc.”

“I can’t get you in if I don’t have my press credentials anymore. When is WayneTech going to lift the media blackout?”

“Oh, sorry, that’s right. I’ll get on that. I just can’t let Luthor skate on this one again. I just need one piece of evidence linking him to those last three shipments.”

“Bruce, I—“ More cold air. “You know no one wants to put that son of a gun away more than I do. God knows the things he’s put me and Lois through. And I appreciate you wanting to help clear my name—“

“No, it’s bigger than that, Clark. I know you’re too noble to care but the way he talked to you, *on national television*, like you were some sort of . . . cancer to mankind. I’m not going to sit by and watch him defame *your* character when I know who you really are.”

“You know, after so many years trying beat him—“ Clark took a seat on a nearby stalagmite. “I think I’m sort of happy just to maintain some sort of equilibrium with the guy.”

“*Come on . . .* “

“I mean it. I don’t . . . I don’t like the person I have to turn into to beat him, you know? All he does is push and push to try to get me to lose control; to finally go over the edge so he can prove he was right all along and that I was really this big alien menace. You know, I didn’t ask to be come here. I would’ve been perfectly fine sharing the same fate as everyone else back where I come from. I was brought here against my will and then just . . . expected to fit in. How was I gonna fit in here? With all the things I could do? How could I ever . . . ? I just wanted people to trust me, you know? Just trust that I wouldn’t hurt them. And I spent so many years building up that trust and it seems like he can just wave it away with a flick of his hand or, knowing the right thing to say at that right time. I just can’t compete with the way he can twist things. Not and fight fair, anyway.”

Bruce swiveled in his chair. “You see, that’s what I mean. You care about fighting fair. Luthor doesn’t care about that. That just proves what a sleaze job the guy is.”

By now, Bruce could see that Clark was actually wringing the edges of his super-strong cape into tiny little red threads. He walked over and sat next to his friend.

“You know I trust you, right?”

“You’re not like most people, Bruce.”

“No. I guess I’m not. Thank God for that, hunh?” They both shared a chuckle. Well, Clark did.

“It just feels like I worked so hard, and I’ve finally got something close to a normal life with Lois, and he just . . . won’t leave me alone. He just . . . won’t believe that I could really be a good guy.”

“It’s not about that, Clark. Some people let jealousy cloud their minds so much that it doesn’t matter what you do. They paint you as the bad guy and there is no getting out. If Luthor gave up what he thought about you he wouldn’t be Luthor anymore.”

“That’s a depressing thought.”

“I’m gonna get him, Clark. He thinks he’s so goddamned smart. He thinks he’s got all the angles figured out, but I’ve got a trick or two for him. And we’ll get the evidence we need to prove to the world he’s a fraud.”

“Bruce, don’t let him do to you what he’s done to m—”

“I’m gonna get him, Clark. I’m gonna get that son of a bitch.”

## Chapter Three

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

“Mm-hm.”

“What were some of the first books you read when you were teaching yourself about criminal investigation?”

“You know the first books I read? Psychology books. Most of what you need to crack the criminal mind Jung and Freud theorized a century ago.”

“Psychology, hunh? Could you show me?”

“Are you . . . are you really wanting to do this?”

“Do what?”

“Look, Clark, I noticed you’d been a little upset with me since I made that comment about you not being a detective—“

“Bruce, this isn’t—“

“Let me finish.” Clark let him. “The key to becoming proficient in criminal investigation is that you have to love it. I love what I do, Clark. Think about it. Why else would I spend so much time in a bat-infested underground cave? I don’t want you to think that I think you can’t become a fine criminal investigator. I know you can. But you have to want to because it’s something that’s coming from inside you. Not to impress me. You don’t have to impress me.”

“I’m not trying to impress you, Bruce.”

“I didn’t mean it that—“

“Believe it or not, everything isn’t about you.”

“Don’t get offended, Clark.”

“I just think that if I’m going to take on more leadership roles . . . “

“Is that what this is about?”

“What?”

“You want the team coordinator position?”

“It’s not—“

“Because you could do that tomorrow.”

“It’s not just being a team coordinator, I want to be the kind of coordinator people can trust.”

Bruce sat still for a minute. “Listen, if you want to be more of a leader, you are going have to be able to accept that you will fail sometimes.”

“Where’s that coming from?”

“You. You don’t want to try being coordinator because you don’t want to fail, and Earth’s Mightiest Hero doesn’t fail.”

“I don’t know if I like how you put that.”

“It’s understandable. You do not have much of a record of failure. Taking on a new responsibility can be . . . intimidating.”

“Well, what I’m trying to do is to not be intimidated by preparing myself to the highest degree possible. People expect a certain level of . . . achievement from me. I wouldn’t just be letting myself down.”

“Have you talked to Lois about this?”

“She said I should go for it.”

“She pushes you.”

“Where is *that* coming from?”

“Just an observation. Women aren’t supposed to make you feel more pressure that you’ve already got.”

“She doesn’t make me feel pressured.”

“Alright.”

“Why do you say things like that, Bruce? Lois has never been anything but kind to you.”

“This isn’t about me and Lois, Clark, this is about you and Lois. You’ve got an extremely high-pressure job. It just makes sense that whoever a man is seeing should be helping to . . . relieve that pressure in some way.”

“Whoever I’m seei—She *does* relieve pressure!”

“Alright.”

Clark shook his head, slow like a spurned god.

“I’ve got a patrol to do.”

“On Thursday? Isn’t this your research night at the fortress?”

“I don’t want to be alone tonight. I want to see people. I want to help people.”

“Psychology books, Jung and Freud. Then, chemistry, biology, and physics.”

“Is that all?”

“Then, sociology. You gotta understand where these criminals come from.”

“Maybe you should get out. Meet some normal people. Meet some normal women.”

“No such thing, my friend.”

“They’re not all . . . there’s someone out there that you’re going to be able to find happiness with.”

“I was happy with Selina.”

“I wouldn’t call that happiness. Maybe sensory gratification. That woman was not a good influence on you.”

“Is that why you put her in jail?”

“I put her in jail because she’s a criminal.”

“What are we talking about right now, Clark?”

“Go out. During the day. Enjoy the city that you protect. Enjoy the good people who owe you their safety. Or else, what are you fighting for?”

“Ghosts, I guess.”

“Good night, buddy.”

*Swoosh*

“Good night, Clark.”



## Chapter Four

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“I’ve got your cover for BioGenesis, Inc. The credentials should get you into media day and the lab tour.”

“Great.”

“Did you see the new prank your friend pulled?”

“He’s just looking for attention.”

“It was mostly harmless. Just scared a lot of people. Commissioner Gordon’s boys managed to clean it up pretty quick.”

“The World’s Finest.”

“You know what this means, though, don’t you?”

“I honestly have no idea this time.”

“He always amps it up until you respond.”

“I’m not responding this time. The juniors can handle it. If not them, Tim; if not him, Barbara; if not her, Dick. I’m not giving him what he wants this time.”

“And he will eventually kill someone.”

“I’m not going to play his game. You know this is all a big joke to him, right? Even when people die, it’s just part of the game.”

“Bruce, have you ever read the philosopher Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel?”

“Wh—What? Hegel? This has something to do with Hegel?”

“Hegel believed that the relationship between master and slave was an interdependent one; one in which the master derives just as much identity from the slave as the slave does from the master. They are in a sense—“

“Yes . . . no, I’m familiar with the master-slave dialectic, Clark. But it baffles me as to how you could possibly think that might apply in this situation.”

“Hegel believed that at first the master and slave see reflections of themselves in each other, but that once they recognize that they are separate entities, so begins a struggle to the death.”

“You realize he wasn’t really talking about real masters and slaves, don’t you? The analogy was meant to represent how people form full self-consciousness.”

“No, to tell you the truth, the man strikes me as someone who just likes to read his own words. But the analogy he was making has merit. I think it really speaks to what might be behind your relationship with your greatest nemesis.”

“Okay, I’m intrigued.”

“Bruce, have you ever considered the possibility that this man might have . . . feelings for you?”

Bruce sat silently for a moment, letting the impact of that implication wash over him.

“Of course I’ve considered it. You don’t think I’ve tried everything I can to get him to lose interest?”

“But as long as you keep fighting for what you believe in, how could he ever lose interest?”

“What are you suggesting, Clark?”

“I’m not suggesting anything. Well, maybe I am. It seems to me that as long as you keep doing what you do, he will always be there. You are the source of his infatuation. And in a way, he’s created himself as a response to you.”

Bruce’s entire carriage was hanging one level lower.

“So what am I supposed to do? Quit? Give up? That means he wins.”

“No, you have to . . . communicate with him. You have to acknowledge him and recognize him for what he is.”

“It’s a waste of time. He’s insane.”

“Love makes people do strange things, Bruce.”

“I’ve always suspected it, but I never knew how to have a conversation about it. Or who I could talk to.”

“Listen, I’m not saying you should or shouldn’t do anything. I only want you to see that there’s . . . there’s nothing to be ashamed of. None of anything that he’s done is your fault. It’s all in his head.”

“But what if I’ve been the cause of all those people he’s hurt?”

“You are not his judge. But you’ve been spending years bringing him to justice, and then just dropping him off. And what’s that gotten you?”

“Thanks, Clark.”

“I know this wears on you, Bruce. Dick’s seen it too. So has Alfred.”

“You guys have been talking about me?”

“We care about you. And we need you. To be strong. Both mentally and physically. Maybe it’s time for a paradigm shift.”

“I had that talk with Queen.”

“How’d it go?”

“He still busted my balls. Gave me some line like I wasn’t the only one keeping people like us in check. I think he meant it as some sort of show of solidarity.”

“That’s something.”

“I really don’t know what Dinah sees in him.”

“Bruce!”

“I really don’t. She’s a really smart lady. I just don’t get it.”

“The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Spare me.”

“Listen, I’ll see you at the next team meeting. No videoconferencing this time.”

“It’s a perfectly efficient way of communication.”

“And don’t patrol all night.”

“Alright. Hey, Clark?”

“Yeah, buddy?”

“Thanks for . . . being someone I’d feel comfortable talking about these . . . types of things with.”

“Anytime.”

“I’m proud that I get to know that side of you. People have a lot of nicknames about how great you are, but they have no idea about the size of your heart, Clark.”

“Thanks, Bruce.”

“You’re a good man. The best I know.”

“You’re a good man, too, Bruce. A great man.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. I’ve done things . . . things that I knew, even at the time, came from a . . . a dark place. A place I don’t like to go. But I’ve never seen you consciously choose from that place. It’s . . . amazing. I’ve never seen anything like it. That’s what makes you . . . who you are. Not because of any kind of incredible feat you can do.”

“Bruce, that is . . . the greatest compliment I’ve ever been given.”

“Clark . . . “

“Let’s leave it at that.” And with that, he was gone.

“Clark, I know you can hear me. Don’t shut me down. Clark?”

## Chapter Five

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Dian—Clark told you about the secret entrance?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, I told him he could tell anyone he thought I could trust.”

“I wanted to talk to you about . . . I wanted to clear up what I meant by the comment I made.”

“No need.”

“Clearly there is. Here me out, comrade.”

“You said what you said. Alright? I’m not a child. I don’t need you to coddle me.”

“Bruce, I want you to understand something about my upbringing. On our island, men got respect only one way. If they could take on one of my sisters in open combat, we treated them as equals.”

“So you want to spar? I could use a workout.”

“No, that’s—maybe later, but that’s not what I mean. Working with you and Clark and the others is the first time I’ve been exposed to a variety of men who approach combat from all sorts of tactical methods. The ingenuity of your sex is quite amusing, actually. More than I gave you credit for.”

“Diana, look—I’ll admit it. I was a fan, alright? I’ve been reading about your people since I was a boy. And when I saw a chance to work with you I—I guess expected something . . . different.”

“Bruce, what I came here tonight to tell you is that you are the most intimidating tactician I have ever known. And I have known gods among men. I use terms like ‘skulking in the shadows’ to hide the fact that of all men, I am not sure I am your match as a warrior. And that is . . . that is not an easy thing for me to say. Especially not to a man.”

“So why are you telling me now?”

“Because you’re . . . you’re important to me, Bruce. I’m not afraid to say it. I need you on this team. It makes me feel more . . . secure.”

“Alright, Diana, we’re good. Let me tell you how it’s gonna be. I’m going to have your back. When I tell you I’m covering you, that’s the end of the story. You say you wanna make a difference? I’m gonna see you get there. I’m like your guardian angel, right?”

“I’m going to accept you talking to me this way because my new personal project is working on my sexist prejudices.”

“So no more wise-ass—“

“That’s quite enough, Bruce.”

“Would you rather a more formal mode of address? I’ve been schooled in all the standards of etiquette.”

“No, that’s not what I—I like that you . . . push me, Bruce. I like that you challenge my authority. It’s attractive in a . . . brutish sort of way.”

“Well now what other way would you have it?”

“I see your point. So, are you . . . interested?”

“I usually save that sort of thing for when I’m not working.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I have to tell you something about myself. I try to be considerate about women’s feelings. I tell myself I’m going to be more sensitive, but I have . . . a history.”

“Are you really expressing concern for my feelings, brave man?”

“If you want to talk about this, then let’s talk about it. I’m sure most men have a hard time keeping up with you, but I—when you go there with me, I take you all the way. Do you understand what I’m saying? It’s too intense for most, and then they find a way to blame me for it not working out.”

“Too intense? What is that supposed to me—?”

“That’s just what I always hear. That’s just what they always say. ‘You’re too intense, Bruce.’ At first they like it, and then it gets to be too much. Always. With all of them. It’s always the same. They’re *all . . . always . . . the same*. They say they like it, and then it gets too intense. I don’t know if I’m supposed to *change* or what, but . . . I need to tell you that if we’re going to work together, that if we go there, and it doesn’t work out, that you’ll still be able to keep your head.”

“You know what, Bruce? Maybe it’s best if we keep things light. If something happens, it happens.”

“That’s probably best.”

“Still,” she swiped a strand of hair from her tiara, “you didn’t really answer the question.”

Bruce swiveled in his chair and made hard eyes at Diana, who had all of a sudden turned into a pouty princess.

“Really, Diana?”

“It’s just a question.”

“How does any man resist you?”

“I bend them to my will.”

“I’m glad I’m on your side.”

“So . . . are you still up for a little sparring? Work off a little steam?”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.”

## Chapter Six

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Barry.”

“Barry has made quite a bit of headway on our project.”

“What’d you find out?”

“So, the environmental changes aren’t global, they’re dedicated to certain specific regions around the world that are either most vulnerable to solar flares or are at the weakest points in the geomagnetic field—unless both of those groups of regions are related.”

“And you couldn’t detect any change in axis tilt or orientation?”

“Bruce, I can’t tell you how hard it is to tell from how far back I have to go. Even with my vision, it’s just a matter of scale. I’m too small to be able to tell the whole story.”

“So even when I was making pole-to-pole relays amping up the signal—“

“I couldn’t get visual confirmation.”

“Okay. Okay, but we still have the EM traces from your relays. I think there’s some good mine-able data in there. I’ve just gotta clean it up.”

“As you clean I can be analyzing the bit streams. It’ll take that much time to decode anyway.”

“Is the best way to do that in your head? You don’t need my algorithms or anything?”

“When I can just go through every combination methodically, it gives me more confidence in my figures.”

“I’ll leave you two to it, then.”

“Thanks, Clark.”

“Thanks, Clark.”



“Clark told me about your other emergency. He said you needed my help with biochemical residue?”

“Well, yeah, help, and frankly, you have the most pristine crime lab in the country, Bruce. I know I can always trust the samples from your lab.”

“Hunh. Really? The country?”

“All the precincts I’ve been to. Gotham PD’s actually got the number-two lab in the country, and yours is a class above theirs.”

“How about that? Not the world, though?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“What did you find out?”

“I didn’t really find anything new out, I just—I just had a new theory I wanted to test out.”

“Wait, is this—? Is this a new theory on possible outcomes?”

“I believe I might have been able to stop the man who killed her.”

“Barry, we’ve been down this road.”

“No. We were only looking for *how* she could have been killed. I’ve made my peace with that. I’ve made my peace with the most likely scenarios. What I’m looking at now is ways in which I could have changed that outcome initially and ways I can change possible outcomes in the future.”

“Barry, this is a loop, though, don’t you get it? These are unanswerable questions. Every outcome is going to be a tautology. Maybe if we focused our energy—“

“Bruce, you don’t get it, okay? You don’t get it because they could never confirm how she died. It could have been anything! Anything! And if it could have been anything, it could come back! It could get me, it could get Iris! I can’t let that happen.”

“Alright, alright, it’s fine, Barry, it’s fine. Once we’re done with this data we’ll analyze your samples and run through some more scenarios.”

“If it’s too much trouble, I have full access to the Central City—“

“No, Barry, it’s fine. I’m glad you came to me.”

A second stretches to a minute.

“It’s not just your equipment, Bruce. I ask for your help with this case because I *do* know you know what it’s like to lose—“

“I know, man. It’s good. I’m glad you do. It’s a horrible thing to have in common, but—“

“Right, right, I get it.”

“Are you still doing those training classes with Queen?”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

“You too, hunh?”

“I just don’t get what it is with that guy. It’s his way or the highway.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well it’s just—I don’t know. Let’s just say his idea of loosening up is not my idea of loosening up and, you know, that’s okay, to each his own, right? But he just won’t let it be, you know? He makes it like you’re the ‘square’ because you’re not his idea of a ‘free thinker.’ And Hal always supports him whenever it’s just the three of us.”

“Do you know I once saw him carrying his lunch down the hall looking for people to talk to because the lunch room was empty? What kind of guy works so hard looking for acceptance?”

“Looking for people to talk to? That’s just—I don’t know—sad, I guess.”

“I don’t know why the guy just can’t see we’re on the same side.”

“Well . . . “

“You know what I mean, Barry. The Contingency Plan was for everyone’s protection. You know I’m committed to the team, right?”

“Yeah, I do.”

Bruce looked up from his figures.

“You do, right?”

“I do, Bruce.”

A nanosecond passes.

“He’s a good soldier, though.”

“He is. Goddamn him, he’s a good soldier. You know he once placed a shot on a keypad where I had mistyped a launch code?”

“*Ho-Lee*. How does he *see* stuff like that?”

“Never uses specs. Says he has ‘hawk’s eyes.’”

“That’s freaky. Couple weeks back, we were doing a training demo for some new recruits and he got me with a boxing-glove arrow when I was going three-quarters speed.”

“*What?* How?”

“He said it had to do with timing or the wind or some damn thing. I’ve never been hit with anything going that fast. I usually do the hitting. Later on he said he just got lucky, but I don’t know. I think he could do it again.”

“How can he hit anything going that fast?”

“I don’t know. He’s really good with that thing.”

## Chapter Seven

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“Do you have a minute? I was hoping you could give me some insight on Dinah.”

“Insights like what?”

“On some of her triggers. She can behave erratically in the field and I noticed some patterns.”

“What’s her clearance rate?”

“Well it’s . . . it’s one of the team’s best. It’s always been, you know that. Look, this isn’t about her performance, I’m concerned about her.”

“Dinah’s fine, Clark. Your concerns are misplaced. Have you talked to Oliver about this?”

“I wanted to come to you first.”

“I don’t know why. Anyway, Dinah’s fine. Unless somebody makes a crack about her real hair. You didn’t make a crack about her real hair, did you?”

“No . . . “

“*Did you?*”

“*No.*”

“Because she doesn’t like that.”

“I know. I think most people are respectful of her boundaries.”

“Not everybody.”

“Has there . . . ever been an incident?”

“One time, Gardner started pushing her buttons. Wouldn’t let it go. So she pulls down her pants, and says to him, ‘Now do you believe I’m a real blonde? Take a look and see. And while we’re at it, why don’t we see if you’re a real redhead.’”

“Were there people around?”

“It was before a meeting. So when he doesn’t, she just starts going on and on about why she thinks the guy’s ashamed to pull his pants down.”

“Oh, for goodness sakes.”

“And he’s trying to say he’s too professional, but he’s still not doing it so it just backs up what she’s saying.”

“Well, I can’t say Gardner didn’t have that coming. That shut him up, I guess.”

“He didn’t speak to her for a year. Only in the field.”

“Was there a report?”

“Yeah, she got a write-up, but she also cracked the android case that year, so—“

“That was that year? That was brilliant work.”

“Dinah’s fine. She tends to go a little off the tracks when things are rocky between her and Queen, is all.”

“Off the tracks, like how?”

“Off the tracks like she’ll blame herself for not being good enough. And then she’ll get back at him for caring by reaching out to others.”

“Others like who?”

“Anyone that’ll be there for her.”

“Alright.”

“Look, I don’t think things are ever going to be a picnic between me and Queen, but it’s never going to hurt the team.”

“You’re sure?”

“I won’t let it.”

“There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“I figured.”

“I just don’t want there to any grey areas between us. I wasn’t trying to shut you down the last time we talked. I’m just . . . I very much depend on the dynamic we have right now. I suppose I am very protective of it.”

“Clark, what I was going to say, I wasn’t trying to ‘transition’ our relationship.”

“And I wouldn’t have had a problem if you were. My people don’t have stigmas attached to those feelings like yours do—it’s a commonly accepted lifestyle. I just don’t think in our case—”

“Clark, I wasn’t trying to . . . Here’s what I was going to say: You are who I’m fighting for, Clark. People like you. Good people. People who try to do right even when no one around them seems to care or notice. You’re the people I’m looking out for. Do you get that?”

“Sure.”

“That’s it. So you just . . . do what you do, and I’ll make sure nothing happens to you.”

“But I’m . . . invulnerable.”

“Really?”

“Listen, maybe when Selina gets out on parole, we four could get together for dinner.”

“Wait, did you just suggest we put Lois and Selina in the same room again?”

“I know how Lois can be with her principles. Her problem is that she’s not very diplomatic.”

“Her problem is that she can’t see herself in someone she’s threatened by. You think Selina’s any less principled? That was the crux of the whole argument.”

“Yes, well. Oh, I’ve been meaning to tell you, my boss is finally going to put my column on the front page of editorial.”

“What? After all these years?! *Finally*. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, it’s been a long road.”

“Your paper has needed a more moderate political voice for years.”

“We’ve really gone far afield.”

“And you’ve lost global credibility, which is inexcusable these days.”

“That might be putting it . . . yes, the new ownership was near-sighted.”

“Congratulations, Clark. You worked hard for it. Now push for more municipal funding for social programs.”

“Already, Bruce?”

“Metropolis is the vanguard. Wherever she goes, other cities follow.”

“I’m with you on some of your ideas, although we could probably talk a bit more about sexual education.”

“It’s the beginning of all the problems. Parental fixations; child neglect and poverty; self-esteem and gender privilege . . . “

“Granted, but surely you don’t think the government should teach those things at such a young age?”

“If not early childhood, then when, Clark? Once they’ve become too traumatized for it to make a difference? And if not by the government, then by whom? The same parents who had been mis-educated by reactionary ‘reformers’ a generation before? How do we get to the root of the problem, Clark?”

“Alright. Food for thought. My first column runs in December.”

“Cheers, buddy.”

## Chapter Eight

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce. You seem not-grim today.”

“Is that a thing?”

“Forget I said anything. What’s up?”

“I got him. The last few files on Luthor’s hard drive tell the whole story.”

“You got all this from the BioGenesis op?”

“The final piece of the puzzle. This whole thing was a shell game. He had dozens of dummy operations that cycled goods through but didn’t make any profit. It was all just to divert attention from what he was really doing.”

“Which was?”

“Creating an evidence trail.”

“What? For what crime?”

“That’s just it. The evidence he’s leaving doesn’t lead back to any crimes I have him for.”

“So it seems it’s not the whole story just yet.”

“It’s the blueprint to what he’s doing. It’s almost as if he’s dangling small-time busts in front of me to see if I’ll bite before he goes for the big score.”

“Dangling it in front of *you*? Do you really think he’s engaging with you here?”

“I’d be a fool to not think he’s studied me. He knows what’ll get a ping on my system. Just a second.”

Bruce sticks in a sonar earbud and makes some notes.

“He thinks by leaving false evidence I’m going to get distracted and leave him alone to do his daily dirt, but he is sorely mistaken. I gave Gordon’s boys a complete list of hotspots.



Jennings and Bryant caught the case, so I'm thinking Luthor's going to have some unpleasant disruptions."

"I was thinking of recruiting Jennings. I think we can fit her out to be a handy operative."

"She's a cop to the bone. We might wanna catch her once she's in the discussion for sergeant, though."

"Have you spoken to Arthur lately?"

"I have. I went to the coast last week to close a shipping agreement and he briefed me on violations and abuses."

"The climate changes are becoming a big problem in his administration. Whole biocommunities are dying off, and with all the microscopic organisms, that's millions of families he has to justify things to."

"Do even the primitive organisms operate on that level of consciousness?"

"Arthur says they do. He says sentience has nothing to do with our definitions of intelligent or primitive life. Every animal has feelings just like we do."

"I remember the tour he took us on. Trying to comprehend the diversity of life down there is . . . 'mind-boggling' doesn't cover it."

"I have to tell you Bruce, at times I'm surprised he's stuck around this long. I can't help thinking we haven't done enough to prevent what the world does to his kingdom."

"Well, if we get to the bottom of this climate-change issue, that'll go a long way toward making a difference. We may not be able to have made much progress with world legislators, but the results we're finding should be enough to directly influence popular opinion."

"Hopefully that'll make a difference."

"You still think he's got a bigger issue with you."

"I don't know what it is. It's nothing he ever says, he just . . . you know, he never looks me in the eye when he's talking to me."

"That's . . . never been my experience."

"I don't know. . . he sort of looks away or around, like he's focused on something else? Almost like he was . . . performing for me? Does that sound bizarre?"

"Little bit."

“But when he’s talking to the group, he looks straight at me.”

“I have noticed that.”

“It’s like he wants to make sure I’m . . . paying attention? I don’t know why I can’t shake it.”

“Well you can’t waste your energy being anxious about it. We’re not empaths. If someone’s got an issue, we have to give them the space to find their own courage to bring it up. If we go around coddling people . . . “

“We’re just going to enforce the ‘Trinity’ image, I know.”

“I’ve always thought you and Arthur would have a lot in common.”

“How so?”

“Him being master of the sea, you being master of the sky. It’s like you’re both these great caretakers.”

“I’m not master of the sky, Bruce. There are so many creatures in the world that don’t even know I exist. And Arthur’s not really a master. Being a king is more like being a public servant.”

“The kind of king *Arthur* is is more like being a public servant. Most kings believed their subjects should be subservient to them.”

“Well, he’s a good king then.”

“He was born to it. It’s an honor that we have him on this team, really.”

“I’d like to think it goes both ways.”

“I wish I had a camera in Luthor’s office so I could see the look on his face when he realizes I’m not going down any of his little rabbit holes.”

“You actually look like you’re having fun.”

“I like to bust sleazebags. Their discomfort brings me . . . I don’t know . . . *ease*.”

“So if Arthur’s master of the sea, and I’m master of the sky, what does that make you? Master of the land?”

“Only at night.”

## Chapter Nine

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“So, you’ll be happy to know I’ve taken some daytime excursions.”

“I thought I noticed a tan. How was it?”

“Not . . . unbearable. I caught a Gargoyles game.”

“How’d you like it?”

“I was amazed by the ease with which drunken frat boys can seamlessly transition into drunken fat men.”

*Sigh.* “Anything else?”

“The music was a little cheery for my taste. The organ should be strictly a funeral instrument.”

“*Bruce.*”

“Alright, alright, there was one moment that I have to say I enjoyed. There was this little kid sitting next to me and he and his dad were playing little word games with the players’ names, you know? Making up little nicknames for them. So one of them the kid thought up was pretty funny, it was like ‘Tom DaCosta loves pasta’ or something like that. So I snickered a little bit and the kid looks over at me and just starts losing it, you know? He just starts saying ‘Tom DaCosta loves pasta’ over and over again like it was the funniest thing in the world. And I mean, these are big belly laughs, right? I thought he was gonna pass out. And his dad’s looking over at me like, ‘Sorry, pal.’ But I just . . . I don’t know . . . I wanted to thank him. I wanted to thank him for creating the space to raise this incredibly . . . happy child.” The last words trail off into a faint echo.

“Bruce?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

“My dad was an awful baseball player. He used to tell me stories of how he loved the game so much but he would never get picked to play with the other kids. Couldn’t hit, couldn’t catch, nothing. But he loved the game. Then as I got older, I learned how true it was. I could catch better than he could at nine. I’d lay a fastball right down the middle and it would just bounce off his glove. He was hopeless. It was unbelievable.”

“My pa used to catch my fastballs with a pillow he taped around his hand.”

“I can’t . . . I can’t understand why we remember the things we do. To this day, one of the only clear memories I have of my dad is him running all over the grounds, chasing the balls he couldn’t catch.”

“You had a great dad.”

“He was a good guy. He told me any real man puts his family above everything.”

“I guess you lived up to that ideal.”

“What are you talking about? I never started a family.”

“Are you kidding? Dick, Barbara, Alfred, Tim . . . not to mention your legion of acolytes.”

“But that’s not a *family* family.”

“Bruce, I want you to hear me on this.”

“Sorry.” Bruce looked up from his microscope and took off his gloves.

“What you have is as much of a family as what I had in Kansas, and what your dad had with you and your mom. Just because it might not fit the traditional picture doesn’t mean that any of those people depend on you any less to be there and provide for them. You’re their pa, Bruce, whether you want to admit it or not.”

“I never thought of it that way. I mean, I knew I had a network—“

“Not a network. A family. And you’re the patriarch. You need to own that, because that’s how all those people see you.”

“Pa Wayne.”

“That’s right, Pa Wayne. And probably not the easiest one to please.”

“Do you think . . . do you think that’s what was behind what happened with Jason? He was looking for . . . approval?”

“Don’t make me answer that, Bruce. You’re supposed to be the smart one.”

“Thanks for sending Diana here, by the way. Turns out I sort of had her wrong.”

“I know. Normally you can tell when Diana doesn’t mean for something she says to sound the way it sounds.”

“I guess she hit a sore spot this time.”

“No, that wasn’t it.”

“No? Then what was it?”

“You definitely have your faults, Bruce, but insecurity in your abilities is not one of them. I agree that you needed to send a message to Diana. If people lose their respect for what you do, that’s half your power out the window.”

“Half my power?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Take these samples with you to the fortress, will you? I’m doing a systems recalibration and I don’t want to take any chances my containment module will rise to room temperature.”

“Take a night off. I want to show you those atmospheric disturbances I was telling you about.”

“All the way up to the fortress? Can’t I see it on my monitors?”

“It’s not the same as being there. The charged particles in the air mixed with a sunset that never quite goes down. It’s quite a show.”

“Yeah, okay. Maybe we could work on next year’s mission forecasts while I’m up there.”

“You have roster assignments made up?”

“Prospective roster assignments, pending yours and Diana’s approval.”

“So . . . did Alfred cook any real food tonight?”

“I don’t see how fried chicken and apple pie is real food but roasted chicken and an apple is not.”

“Bruce, nobody respects your eating habits more than I do. But calling what you eat ‘real food’ is a stretch.”

“It’s efficient, and high in energy and nutritional value.”

“Right. Sounds delicious. So, he only cooked for you tonight?”

“Nah, Tim and his girlfriend came over, so I think he made ‘real food.’ Go on up and make yourself a plate and I’ll be ready by the time you get back.”

*"Up, up, and away."*

## Chapter Ten

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“Any word from Ray on the BioGenesis surveillance?”

“I took Ray off that detail. He’s been having some perspective issues.”

“What, like he’s wondering why he’s on the job?”

“No, like literal perspective. He’s been having trouble distinguishing between the realities he experiences while growing and shrinking in size.”

“He experiences different realities?”

“From his perspective. You’ve gotta imagine, when he shrinks by a factor of, say, ten, all of his size relativities shift to the degree that he’s for all intents and purposes in another universe. What to us are dustballs are moving forests to him. A house cat becomes a sabretooth cat, that sort of thing.”

“Like that movie.”

“Sadly, yes.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that while we are constantly in this reality, he is constantly shifting back and forth . . . and starting to lose . . . perspective . . . on which is the ‘real’ reality.”

“So, like, he’s choosing his reality.”

“Well, I think it goes deeper than that. You remember those forest people he saved? He’s a hero in that reality. He told me he wasn’t so sure if he wasn’t destined to be there.”

“What do *you* think?”

“I think he needs to spend some time in his reality of origin. Reconnect with us.”

“It’s been hard for him since Jean.”

“Who could blame him?”

A minute pause.

“Say, Clark?”

“Yeah, Bruce?”

“Why’d you ask if Ray had been questioning being on the job?”

“No reason.”

“Have you been having some thoughts?”

“Maybe a few. I’ve been wondering if we’ve been committed to the real mission, the one you and Diana and I set out to accomplish.”

“It’s been a challenge.”

“Can we really change man’s nature the way we’ve been doing? Can we really make people live lives of real peace?”

“Look, Bruce, like I told Diana: We’re no different than Gandhi or King or Mother Theresa. They weren’t gods and neither are we. They were all just people, trying to make a difference by living their lives a certain way. And they made an impact. Does it mean everything they did was perfect? No. Does it mean we’ll make the same impact in the same way? Probably not. But half the time they probably didn’t know the things they did right were right at the time.”

“Half the time? You really think so?”

“The point is we just gotta do what we can. We’ve got a lot of abilities and a lot of resources and we just have to utilize them the best way we know how.”

“You make it sound sort of . . . mechanical.”

“I don’t mean to.”

“I just feel like we could take a step back and take a look at ourselves every once in a while.”

“Well, why don’t you take that on? That sounds like a good project for you and Ray. Like, an assessment committee. I’ll bet Ronnie, John, and Barry’d like to be a part of that, too.”

“And Arthur and Zatanna and Sheira.”

“Not Zatanna.”

“This thing with Zatanna has got to—“



“”This thing with Zatanna—?””

“I’ll put together a nice group.”

A moment flashes past.

“What if Ray decides to stay in that reality, the one where he’s a hero?”

“He’s a hero in this reality.”

“But what if he decides to stay?”

“Who could blame him, Clark?”

## Chapter Eleven

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Hello, Clark.”

“You wanted to see me?”

“Could you get me one more week’s access to your paper’s database?”

“That is not information for public consumption, Bruce.”

“I’m not some crackpot, I’m a . . . do-gooder.”

“They’re all do-gooders.”

“Luthor’s finally slipped. I think the names on this database are the final piece to the puzzle.”

“And you really think he just . . . *missed* it?”

“I know the company that uses the database with these employee IDs was the only one listed amongst his company assets that doesn’t have a tax ID number.”

“Look, Bruce, maybe Luthor just got away with this one.”

“Luthor’s fatal flaw is his vanity. He stashes Easter eggs in all his security software just to let hackers know he knows they’re there. But anybody that takes so much time to be cute—“

“Bruce, I wanted to talk to you about something. I’m stepping down as our ambassador to the U.N.”

“For how long?”

“Permanently.”

“Permane—you *do* know that a large reason we have as much political leeway as we do is because you’re our figurehead?”

“I realize that—“

“It’s *your* image that keeps us from being the scary monsters, Clark. Because they know you’ll protect them, even from us.”

“I understand your perspective, Bruce—“

“We’ve never had another ambassador to the U.N.”

“I think it’s time.”

“Have you thought of a replacement?”

“Jefferson.”

A shock of excitement ran down Bruce’s spine.

“Very . . . shrewd political move.”

“He’s the right person for the job. He’s popular, people know him as principled, an environmentally conscious industrialist.”

“And being a pacifist doesn’t hurt.”

“Mm.”

“And he’s committed to his community without it being threatening.”

“That’s not easy. Most race-conscious black men in public life are looked upon with suspicion by certain segments of our society.”

“Yeah. Did he ever tell you why he never dropped the *black* from his name?”

“I didn’t even know that was an issue.”

“Yeah he was getting pressure a while back from some of the civil rights groups, saying it promoted stereotypes. You know what he told me? He said he didn’t change it because he was proud of his black heritage. He felt that if he could fight for the innocent and protect the helpless, that’s what was really showing the world what America was about.”

“I think he’ll be a worthy successor.”

“Have there been aspects of the gig you’ve not been liking so much?”

“Not really. To tell you the truth, I just don’t want to be seen as a king. I think the ambassadorship should rotate every . . . six years or so.”

“Why six years?”

“I like the Jimmy Carter presidential model.”

“Did you see *Face the Nation* this past Sunday? Luthor was on there, acting like he had the world at the end of a string.”

“Most of those shows drive me around the bend.”

“He’s so smug about having black support. He never passes up an opportunity to get photos of himself with lots of brown faces. I don’t care how he grew up, talking black and eating black food does not make you black.”

“Didn’t he move in with that foster family when he was fairly young? Seems to me if you spend fifteen years of your childhood raised with a black family in a black neighborhood—“

“Luthor cannot claim a ‘part-black’ identity, okay? His ancestry is not African.”

“Charlize Theron’s ancestry *is* African. Is she ‘black’?”

“I hate it when you do that. Put your air-quote fingers down. I don’t care how Luthor shaves his head or wears his goatee. Trying to identify with the plight of black people does not make you black.”

“Then what does? Biology?”

“I hate that guy. And not because he’s black . . . or white . . . or whatever he wants to call himself. He’ll do for *anything* for acceptance, you know? Lie, cheat, steal . . . as long as he thinks people appreciate him. That’s all that matters to him. He has no . . . “

“ . . no moral compass.”

“He’s completely unprincipled. But he’s got a great deal of influence. It’s psychotic.”

“I was thinking you could give Jefferson some of those lessons you gave me on world military conflicts.”

“Yeah, I’ve still got my slides. Very shrewd, indeed.”

“Jeff’s the right person for the job.”

“But still . . . it makes us look good on many levels.”

“He’ll be a worthy successor.”

“All the same, though.”

“All the same,” Clark said with a wink.

## Chapter Twelve

“Hello, Wayne.”

“Hello, Queen.”

At this point, a really uncomfortable amount of time passes. There’s no way to properly express how the passing of that time felt as it went by and the tension that filled it unless one were to actually stop reading, sit back, and really meditate on a moment of your life which makes you feel awkward just thinking about it. Like, one of those moments where you don’t know *what* you were thinking and you really wish you could take it back. Some of those moments are related to childhood and that’s fine; but some of them you *knew* better, and you just lost sight of your better nature. Every time you think about that moment you know what you could have done differently but . . . you just can’t. We can’t travel back in time, so we just have to live with it, live with that memory as a part of our lives. This amount of time felt like that moment. And it lasted for just about as much time as it took to read this paragraph.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“The suit keeps me pretty warm.”

“Right.”

The tension is replaced by, what? a flutter of wings? shadows cast on stalactites?

“Listen, I want you to know . . . I need you to know . . . my first priority is to the mission.”

“On that we agree.”

“And I have the greatest respect for your work.”

“I think the problem here, Wayne, is that you don’t really have an out. So you know what? I’m gonna give you one. I don’t have any ill will in my heart for you, partner. I’m not threatened by whatever you’re threatened by. So you can go back to your little microscopes and battle maps because we are good.”

“I respect your relationship with Dinah.”

The wind howled from the inside.

“Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

“You know, my mother had a lot of male friends. My dad once told me that he told her he had a problem with it. He didn’t, really, but he figured he should flex his muscles, you know, in the marriage? You know what she told him—?”

“Listen, man, we don’t have to build a relationship.”

“I’m not . . . I’m not trying to build a *relationship* . . . “

“Sure you are. And in doing so you’re trying to game me, and you will probably be doing a psych write-up as soon as I slink out of your haunted mansion.”

“What’s your problem with me, Queen?”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you know when we’ve met.”

“What?”

“I don’t know who you *are*! You are the *mission*, man! You don’t even *see* it, do you? You’ve sold yourself on the story that the mission is so important that it doesn’t matter who you have to use or exploit to accomplish it.”

“I . . . have a life.”

“You have become so entangled with the mission that I don’t think you could be surgically removed from it. Name one of your personal relationships that isn’t defined by it.”

“You don’t know me like that, Queen. I have . . . people. I have . . . a life.”

“Listen . . . *Bruce*. I’m going to talk to you now. I’m going to talk to you like I’ve never talked to you before because it’s time. I have no ill will in my heart for you, brother. But life is meant to be lived. And people are meant to be experienced. I know that you believe what you do is right . . . but you need to see that that’s just a part of the story you’ve been weaving for yourself. Manipulating people is . . . not . . . *living*, alright? It’s living on the edges . . . on the fringe . . . just on the verge of *actually* living. But *really* living is about developing genuine relationships of trust and respect with people. It’s not about always gaming everybody. Relationships with people are not meant to be ‘won.’”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Let’s look at your biggest nemesis—“

“Queen, if you’re about to compare me to him—“

“I don’t care. I don’t care what you’re about to say. You set this meeting up so now you’re gonna listen. What do you think makes him a bad guy? Evil acts? Yes. But what’s behind it? He is a master at reading people, and manipulating them through fear. Now, I respect what you do, and I even respect if you use the same methods as your enemies to defeat them. Because he *is* a bad guy. But the moment you let those methods consume you? The moment you let those methods dictate how you deal with *your* life . . . ?”

“The people in my life . . . “

Bruce stopped, and started again.

“The people in my life . . . “

“Name me one relationship, Bruce.”

“Queen—*Oliver*—I did you a disservice and a great disrespect. I let my personal feelings cloud my perspective on someone who I truly believe is a great warrior. And I disrespected myself by spreading negative comments.”

“That’s . . . that’s all I wanted to hear, Bruce.”

“I know. You put me through a lot of shit to get it. But I know.”

“I work *really* hard.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t ask anybody to glorify my name.”

“I respect that.”

“But I do deserve honor.”

“Yeah.”

I don’t know what kind of wings were fluttering earlier. Maybe they’re doves, now.

“So what’d she tell him?”

“What?”

“What’d your mom tell your dad?”

“She told him she used other men to understand him better. She’d ask them about things they liked, what they liked in women, and then she’d try things out with my dad. She was devoted to him, but he was going to let his insecurities ruin it.”

“Sounds like your mom was good at setting boundaries.”

“I suppose so.”

“Everybody isn’t so good at setting boundaries. Sometimes they count on their friends to remind them of their better nature.”

“Yeah. Are we good?”

“How do I get outta this place?”

“There’s a secret entrance behind the—there, you found it.”

*Open > Psychological Profiles > Queen, Oliver*

Bruce’s face fell into a scowl.

“I have a life.”



## Chapter Thirteen

This chapter is bad luck. And with good reason.

“Hello, Br—What’re *you* doing here?”

“Wait! *No!* What were you about to call me?”

“Where *is* he?”

“No, wait, when you saw me here with the pointy hat, I had you fooled, admit it! You thought I was *him!*”

“I could kill you where you stand.”

“Oh, I was so *close!* It started with a *B*, didn’t it? Where *is* this place? To tell you the truth I have no idea where I am. I got in here through a secret entrance and now I have no clue how to find it again. Does he *live* here, or somewhere close? Wait, are we *underground?*”

“WHERE IS HE?!”

“He’s safe.”

“Tell me where or so help me—“

“You know what? Let me stop you right there because this is kinda getting to be not so funny anymore. I know you got nothing at the end of that ‘or.’ You and I are like two old dance partners. You know you can’t threaten me because I could indeed have your friend strung up in a death trap somewhere like how I like to do. And you know you can’t interrogate me because I randomly alternate between lying and telling the truth. And you know you can’t torture me because I think what you people call torture is *hilarious*. So let’s just acknowledge that I’m not going to tell you until I’m good and ready, like always.”

“What . . . what do you want?”

“I just want you to answer three questions for me.”

“Wait . . . why were you trying on his clothes?”

“Heh. Well, you know, people are wacky. And it might be said that I am a particularly wacky person.”

“What are your questions?”

“First. Why does he hate me?”

Clark got the feeling this was going to be a long night.

“He doesn’t . . . hate you. He disagrees with your lifestyle. You enjoy murdering people.”

“I don’t—! Can I just tell you something? Can I just tell you something about people? Would you agree that there are great people and there are small people?”

“How do you mean?”

“You know, like, people of quality, and then other people who maybe make a whole lotta bad choices and stuff like that, right?”

“I suppose so.”

“So why is it people are always talking about how it’s bad to kill people, but they don’t talk about the *quality* of the people, you know? Is it so bad to kill a *bad* person? I mean, like, we kill all sorts of animals, don’t we? We kill pigs and chickens and cows for food, we kill pests when they get in the house. But do we think for a moment about whether we’re killing a particularly virtuous beast or an ill-mannered beast when we slaughter them? No, we kill good and evil animals with equal disregard.”

“And are you saying we shouldn’t?”

“Are you saying we should? What makes us think that all life, even the most microscopic, shouldn’t have the worth of their lives judged on their merit, rather than on whether they were born human or not? They couldn’t choose how they were born. But you do not defend the helpless piglet, the roast suckling who had done nothing but good deeds before he knew the sweet sickly kiss of the abattoir, do you? That is because you are a speciesist, sir. You defend one species, while I defend a principle. Who is to defend the much-maligned monkey?! the put-upon cockatoo?! THE NOBLE WOMBAT?!”

“I guess there’s a point in there somewhere . . . “

“Are you suggesting that humans are somehow a special species, that we feel things *differently* than animals do?”

“Not exactly, but . . . “

“Then you play me for a fool when you accuse me of enjoying murdering people. Because it is in fact the case my good man that I do *not* just enjoy *murdering* people, I enjoy murdering *small* people; small insignificant worthless people who do nothing with their lives but

fill the world with their noise and their smell. We put no more significance to the killing of an ant than we do to paying for a cup of coffee, but why should we thoughtlessly kill a *great* ant, yet defend the life of a *small* man?!—Okay, funny story, real quick: The first time I used that line, I went out and killed my great aunt on general principle. HA! She was a total bitch, though.”

“Did you have another question?”

“Ah, yes. Why don’t you love me?”

“I have love for all mankind.”

“We’ve established that. But you keep putting me in jail.”

“I put you in jail because you are a criminal.”

“And you are some sort of criminal-putter-in-jail-type person?”

“Mostly, yes.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Is that your third question?”

“Oh, very clever, Mr. Bond. Yes, fine. It better be good.”

“I do it because . . . are you familiar with the Quakers?”

“Welcome to Snoozeville. Population: You.”

“Yes . . . well . . . the Quakers were a very principled sect of Christianity, they had a great deal to do with the ending of slavery—“

**“I KNOW ABOUT THE GODDAMNED QUAKERS! WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THEM?!”**

“I was answering your question, actually, so I could get my friend back.”

“Yes. You’re right, I know. I asked for this. I don’t know why I’m so hot and cold.”

“Well before the prison system, mankind used to do all sorts of awful things to people that . . . well, a lot of times to people that just fell through the cracks. The Quakers tried to make prisons a more . . . humane way to give people at least the chance to rehabilitate themselves, a place where they could be penitent about their mistakes and be productive citizens again once they’d paid their debt to society.”

“The penitentiary system, yes. You know they invented solitary confinement, don’t you?”

“Is the system perfect? No. But I agree with it in principle. At least you’ve got a chance. It’s better than the gallows.”

“Do you know how many hours I had to spend in solitary because of the Quakers? All that time I had to spend with only my own brain. Can you imagine what it’s like to have weeks and months on end go by with only someone like me for company?”

“Frankly, no. Anyway, I answered your question.”

“Alright that was pretty good. So, I’ll bet you’re wondering whether this was all a big trick and if he’s actually gonna come wandering in here any second wondering what’s going on. Well it turns out . . . are you ready for this one? . . . he WON’T be! I DO have him! *Another* funny story. So I knock him out and tie him up earlier this evening, right? After about an hour I work my way into his car and find the auto-navigate button that’s supposed to take you home. But then I must have tripped something up and some sort of gas knocked me out because he’s such an *asshole* and I woke up here. Crazy, right? I couldn’t find my way back here now if I tried. Anyway he’s dangling over a vat of acid in a warehouse on 3<sup>rd</sup> and Delancey. Judging by how long we’ve been talking you have exactly . . . eight seconds before my giant buzzsaw cuts the rope supporting him. You can scan my heart or whatever it is you do to tell if people are telling the truth because you’re such a weirdo. Of course, you could arrest me but that would waste precious time—“

*Zoom!*

“Now. How the hell do I get outta here?”

## Chapter Fourteen

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“Thanks for the save.”

“Comes with the territory.”

“That’s some lousy territory.”

“Right.”

Bruce pulled off his gloves and fired up his electron microscope.

“Say, Bruce?”

“Yeah, Clark?”

“Do you think humans are unfair to animals?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, do you think we discriminate against them for . . . being animals?”

“Oh my God, did you *talk* to him?”

“What?”

“He’s a Level 5 psych case, Clark. You know the protocols.”

“I think I have the mental stability to have one conversation.”

“It’s not about mental stability. People like that—“

“I think I have the mental stability to have one conversation that might save your life.”

“It’s not about mental stability, Clark. People like that have pathologies that it takes a certain degree of training to resist. He’s like a . . . hypnotist. You can’t engage.”

“You mean *I* can’t engage.”

“I don’t engage with him either, Clark. I deflect and redirect.”

“He knows what we’re doing when we do that, now.”

“It’s the only way to deal with him.”

“He was just making some points that sounded a lot like some of the things Arthur was saying——“

“I’ve been down this road with him before. He’s not dangerous because he’s wrong. He’s dangerous because he’s evil.”

“You can right *and* be . . . ?”

“It’s a pretty rare pathology. I think I might have an answer to your issue with Arthur, by the way.”

“With Arthur? I think you were right—I think I need to just put it behind me.”

“You think it could have had anything to do with Mera?”

“Mera? No . . . that was . . . if anything, Arthur should appreciate how I handled things with Mera.”

“Maybe not.”

“I refused to sleep with his wife.”

“Which in some cultures could be considered to be a sign of dishonor.”

“It wasn’t about *their* cultural values, it was about mine.”

“Exactly.”

“So what, I should have slept with her?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s . . . unacceptable.”

“Then that makes you culturally intolerant.”

“Arthur told you this?”

“Mera told Dinah, Dinah told Ollie, Ollie told me.”

“Seriously, Bruce?”

“What?”

“Are we in third grade? And Susie told Billy told Linda told Sue?”

“Did you want the intel or didn’t you?”

“I think I just need to put it behind me.”

“Doesn’t seem to make a difference in you guys working together. You and Arthur are sixth-place on team-up clearance rates.”

“Just sixth? Who’s first?”

“Dinah and Shiera.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Then who?”

“Then me and you.”

“I figured we’d be up there. We worked together long enough.”

“Then Barry and Jordan.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Then Dinah and Jefferson.”

“Dinah clears her share of cases,” he said, frostily.

“Then Diana and Arthur, and then you and Arthur.”

“When Diana and Arthur team up, they have considerable resources at their disposal.”

“Imagine what would happen if they ever went against each other.”

“Why would they ever go against each other?”

“Territory.”

## EPILOGUE

“Say, Oliver, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“You’re pretty tight with Arthur, yeah?”

“We talk sometimes.”

“Has he ever mentioned to you a problem he had with Clark?”

“Mera had a thing for Clark.”

“What?”

“Yeah, a while back. And you know how their culture doesn’t equate sex with marriage fidelity, right? So it’s totally cool for her to tell Arthur and for her to tell Clark she wanted to jump his bones.”

“Are all their people polyamorous or just the nobles?”

“All of ‘em. But Clark’s not into it, right? He tells Mera that with all due with respect that that wouldn’t be respecting of his friendship with his friend Arthur.”

“Clark was married, wasn’t he?”

“Not yet. I mean, he was already into Lois, but he’s always been into Lois.”

“Right. Anyway, it’s just like Clark.”

“I know, right? I know Clark thinks he was doing Arthur a solid, but now all Arthur thinks is that there’s something Clark has that he doesn’t.”

“What?”

“It’s a big deal for the queen to offer herself to someone. No one ever says no.”

“But it’s the same for Arthur . . . ?”

“It’s the same for Arthur. No one’s ever said no to him either. He was going to proposition Lois to make it like a bond between the four.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. So anyway that’s weird. How the hell do I get outta here?”



## Chapter Fifteen

“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“I saw your latest article. Nice work.”

“Thanks. So listen, why’d you tell me Oliver got the story about Mera from Dinah when he really got it from Arthur?”

“Huh.”

“Huh, what?”

“How’d you find out?”

“Are you running a psych op on me, Bruce?”

Bruce smirked. Clark squinted.

“I just needed to know if Queen was going to run and tell you about our conversation. Looks like he did.”

“And you couldn’t just ask?”

“If I asked you I knew you’d think I have it in for Queen, and I don’t, I just needed to see if he’s trying to undermine me.”

“So you lied to me, knowing that if Queen told me the real story I’d come to you to ask why you lied, and then you wouldn’t have to ask.”

“I know you expect a level of trust from me.”

“I don’t even know what that means coming from you, Bruce.”

“*Come on*, Clark.”

“This *was* a psych op on me because you were testing to see if I’d keep that info to myself.”

“A little one. I guess. I’m sorry.”

“Can you even help yourself?”

“I need this intel on Queen. Diana and I are *this close* to finding out what’s going on with Dinah. I need to be able to predict how he’s going to influence her.”

“Diana’s not okay with that mission.”

“Diana’s a soldier.”

“Maybe so, but she’s also a royal emissary. I’m sure there are lines even she won’t cross.”

“Well, we’ll see at the end of this op.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’m . . . I’m consulting with Dinah on Diana’s pathologies.”

“Wait—you have both of them doing psych ops on each other at the same time?”

“It seemed to be the most efficient use of resources.”

“What is the matter with you?”

“What is the matter with *you*? Don’t you *get* it? This is about law and order. Without order there is chaos. I provide order.”

“Spoken like a true god.”

“Well, it’s better than being a false one.”

“I do expect a level of truth from you, Bruce. Do you remember what it was like before I came along? Do you remember how these people used to treat you?”

“And don’t think I’m not grateful. I am. But I can’t be a fool. I have to use the resources at my disposal.”

“But that’s just it -- you don’t. Not the way you do. You’ve told yourself that you don’t have a choice in order to justify venal acts. But it’s just a story. It’s just the story you’ve told yourself to justify why you do what you do. But you can tell yourself a different story, Bruce. You can tell yourself the story that there is someone out there who is watching, even when no one else is, and *does* care about the things you do alone in the dark.”

“Are you talking about God? Because I don’t believe in gods.”

“No, not God. I’m not talking about someone *out there*. I’m talking about acting like someone cares for you. Like you care for yourself.”

“How can I act like I care for myself?”

“Act the way you would if your nine-year-old self was watching. Do things you would do if he was watching. Don’t do things you wouldn’t do if he was watching. Gain his respect.”

“Like, visualization?”

“Yeah, sort of. Just . . . adopt a principle of action; things you will and will not do, based on what that little guy would think of it.”

“Is this something you think *you* can do?”

“It’s all I’ve ever been doing.”

“You’re a better man than me. I’ve done things . . . things that I knew, even at the time, came from a . . . a dark place. A place I don’t like to go. But I’ve never seen you consciously choose from that place. It’s . . . amazing. You try to do right even when no one around seems to care or notice.”

“But you act as if you *can’t* make that choice. Do you think I was born this way? It’s a conscious choice; consistent, conscious acts of choosing. But it’s within your power.”

“I don’t know.”

“You feel more comfortable in the dark.”

“I went to that Gargoyles game that one time.”

“They play a whole season, Bruce.”

“I don’t like watching people in the light. They never really act like themselves. They only reveal who they really are in the dark.”

“That’s a story, my friend. A story you’re telling yourself to justify your actions.”

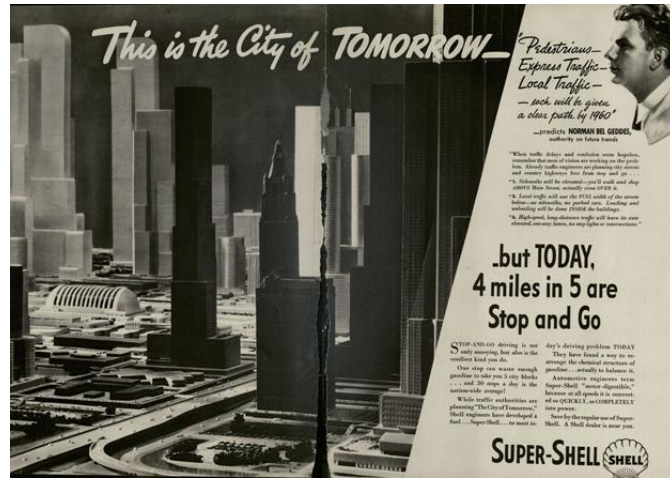
“You make it sound so easy.”

“Do I really? You make it sound hopeless.”

“I have hope.”

“Prove it.”

# Chapter Sixteen



“Hello, Clark.”

“Hello, Bruce.”

“I think I’ve finally got something real on Luthor. The global environmental changes spike at two specific places where he receives or transfers shipments: one in the Baltic Sea and one in the middle of Tony Marscapone’s territory near the North Front docks.”

“Bruce . . .”

“The chemical weapons, the human-trafficking, it’s not what we thought. BioGenesis is about creating new life. Luthor transferred the records from his shipments to an internalized platform, but he left a bread-crum trail a mile long that should lead to the last piece of evidence I need.”

“Bruce . . .”

“He puts his work in, I’ll give him that, but it’s his pride—”

“Bruce, I can’t let—Bruce, you’ve got to stop this.”

“I know I’ve told you I was close before but—”

“No, that’s not it. I can’t let you continue this way. You’ve got to give up on Luthor. You’re not going to get Luthor. You never get Luthor.”

“What’re you talking about I ‘never get’ him?”

“He’s smarter than you, Bruce. You’ve got to let it go. You’re an incredibly intelligent man, too. Maybe the second-smartest in the world.”

“What’re you talking about I ‘never get’ him?”

“Bruce, I’ve . . . I’d like to share something with you. Something I have not shared with . . . something I am not *supposed* to share with anyone.”

The moment of truth.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?”

“I’m leaving, Bruce. I’m going back home.”

“Home to where? Metropolis?”

“ . . . Yes.”

“So what? You’re going home. You’ll be back, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean? Are you taking a vacation?”

“I’m going back to live in Metropolis. My job here is done, I think.”

“Here where? In Gotham?”

“Bruce, Gotham *is* Metropolis. In the future.”



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Bruce blinked as if a bright light had blinded him.

“What the f—?”

“I’m not sure if I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing here. I came here to keep you on the right track, to make sure you turn out to be the hero of Gotham you’re destined to be. But now I’m not sure if I’m even fighting on the right side.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. Metropolis is a place in the present. People go there. People live there.”

“No, they don’t. No one you know has ever been to Metropolis. That’s where the name comes from: the City of Tomorrow.”

“People know about it. It’s on the TV, the news, people have relatives there. This is ridiculous.”

“I would ask you to start doing the research once I’ve left but I know you’re going to anyway. Everyone knows about Metropolis but no one’s ever been there because it doesn’t exist yet. But it will, because of you. You will usher in a new day in this world. I thought it was my destiny to help you reach it, but . . . I’m not so sure if I’m the right influence for you. I say I protect the innocent, but do I really? Maybe I’m just protecting what my picture of ‘innocence’ looks like. Maybe I’m just making you more paranoid, more unsure of yourself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The way you treat people, Bruce. The way you manipulate people. You’re becoming just as bad . . . sometimes worse than . . . the people you’re trying to stop. And that just makes you . . . a supervillain. I don’t think I’m the ‘superior’ influence I thought I was. I think I’m just very prideful.”

“Clark, I’m not sure . . . I’m not sure what your endgame is, here. I’m not sure . . . what you’re trying to get from me.”

“Bruce, I’m not smart enough to game you. I’ve always told you that and it was the truth. The fact is, I’ve got to get back to Lois. Time travel isn’t like how they make it in the movies. When I stay here, I lose time back home. I can’t just go back to when I left. So if I stay here five years, I get back home five years later. I feel like I’ve been getting my life ready to get started, but not really living it. I’ve got to live my life, Bruce.”

“This is ridiculous. What about Lois? What about Luthor? They’re all from Metropolis.”

“I know.”

“Clark, if you really look at this situation, you’ll see that you are not being yourself, right now. Maybe you could come into the lab and let me check you out.”

“No, I’m fine. Just a little blue. Listen, you are the best friend I’ve ever had. None of that was a lie.”

“Clark, where are you . . . “

“And you are the bravest man I’ve ever met. Please never stop trying to find your path.”

“Clark, I . . . don’t want you to leave.”

“You have a greatness in you. That’s the thing you need to remember. That’s all that matters.”

“You were my best friend, too.”

“I know.”

“Goodbye, Clark.”

“Goodbye, Bruce.”



## EPILOGUE

“Say, Barry, can I ask you something?”

“Run it by me.”

“Have you ever been to Metropolis?”

“No, I never have. Been meaning to. I hear they have an amazing crime lab.”

“Where is it located?”

“It’s in . . . New York.”

“Like Gotham?”

“Yep.”

“Where in New York?”

“It’s here, where Gotham is.”

“It’s in the same place that Gotham is? How is that possible, Barry? How can two places be in the same place at the same time?”

“It’s Metropolis during the day, and Gotham at night.”

“What? How is that possible?”

“Because at night, there’s always a better future tomorrow.”